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AUTHOR Moore, Robert B.
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ABSTRACT

This publication includes a study essay that discusses numerous ways in which the English language reflects and promotes racism. Among the topics discussed are black/white color symbolism, terms that reflect obvious bigotry, terms that reflect ethnocentrism on the part of white people, politics and terminology, and "loaded" terms that are used to refer to Africans and to Native Americans. The publication then provides a lesson plan for teaching students at all educational levels to recognize racism in the English language and to learn to use less racist language, and it suggests specific classroom activities. (GW)

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RACISM in the ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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CS 203 459

A Lesson Plan and Study Essay
by Robert B. Moore, Ed. D.

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Racism in the English Language

Language and Culture

An integral part of any culture is its language. Language not only develops in conjunction with a society's historical, economic and political evolution, but also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. Language not only *expresses* ideas and concepts but actually *shapes* thought.[1] If one accepts that our dominant white culture is racist, then one would expect our language—an indispensable transmitter of culture—to be racist as well. Whites, as the dominant group, are not subjected to the same abusive characterization by our language that people of color receive. Aspects of racism in the English language that will be discussed in this essay include terminology, symbolism, politics, ethnocentrism, and context.

Before beginning our analysis of racism in language we would like to quote part of a TV film review which shows the connection between language and culture.[2]

> Depending on one's culture, one interacts with time in a very distinct fashion. One example which gives some cross-cultural insights into the concept of time is language. In Spanish, a watch is said to "walk." In English, the watch "runs." In German, the watch "functions." And in French, the watch "marches." In the Indian culture of the Southwest, people do not refer to time in this way. The value of the watch is displaced with the value of "what time it's getting to be." Viewing these five cultural perspectives of time, one can see some definite emphasis and values that each culture places on time. For example, a cultural perspective may provide a clue to why the negative stereotype of the slow and lazy Mexican who lives in the "Land of Manana" exists in the Anglo value system, where time "flies," the watch "runs" and "time is money."

A Short Play on "Black" and "White" Words

Some may blackly (angrily) accuse him of trying to blacken (defame) the English language, to give it a black eye (a mark of shame) by writing such black words (hostile). They may denigrate (to cast aspersions; to darken) him by accusing him of being blackhearted (malevolent), of having a black outlook (pessimistic, dismal) on life, of being a blackguard (scoundrel)—which would certainly be a black mark (detrimental fact) against him. Some may black-brow (scowl at) him and hope that a black cat crosses in front of him because of this black deed. He may become a black sheep (one who causes shame or embarrassment because of deviation from the accepted standards), who will be blackballed (ostracized) by being placed on a blacklist (list of undesirables) in an attempt to blackmail (to force or coerce into a particular action) him to retract his words. But attempts to blackjack (to compel by threat) him will have a Chinaman's chance of success, for he is not a yellow-bellied Indian-giver of words, who will whitewash (cover up or gloss over vices or crimes) a black lie (harmful, inexcusable). He challenges the purity and innocence (white) of the English language. He doesn't see thing in black and white (entirely bad or entirely good) terms, for he is a white man (marked by upright firmness) if there ever was one. However, it would be a black day when he would not "call a spade a spade," even though some will suggest a white man calling the English language racist is like the pot calling the kettle black. While many may be niggardly (grudging, scanty) in their support, others will be honest and decent—and to them he says, that's very white of you (honest, decent).

The preceding is of course a white lie (not intended to cause harm), meant only to illustrate some examples of racist terminology in the English language.

Obvious Bigotry

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of racism in language would be terms like "nigger," "spook," "chink," "spick," etc. While these may be facing increasing social disdain, they certainly are not dead. Large numbers of white Americans continue to utilize these terms. "Chink," "gook," and "slant-eyes" were in common usage among U.S. troops in Vietnam. An NBC nightly news broadcast, in February 1972, reported that the basketball team in Pekin, Illinois, was called the "Pekin Chinks" and noted that even though this had been protested by Chinese Americans, the term continued to be used because it was easy, and meant no harm. Spiro Agnew's widely reported "fat Jap" remark and the "little Jap" comment of lawyer John Wilson, during the Watergate hearings, are surface indicators of a deep-rooted Archie Bunkerism.

Many white people continue to refer to Black people as "colored," as for instance in a July 30, 1975 *Boston Globe* article on a racist attack by whites on a group of Black people using a public beach in Boston. One white person was quoted as follows:

> We've always welcomed good colored people to South Boston but we will not tolerate radical blacks or Communists. . . . Good colored people are welcome in South Boston, black militants are not.

Many white people may still be unaware of the disdain many African Americans have for the term "colored," but it often appears that whether used intentionally or unintentionally, "colored" people are "good" and "know their place," while "Black" people are perceived as "uppity" and "threatening" to many whites. Similarly, the term "boy" to refer to African American men is now acknowledged to be a demeaning term, though still in common use. Other terms such as "the pot calling the kettle black" and "calling a spade a spade" have negative racial connotations but are still frequently used as for example when President Ford was quoted in February 1976 saying that even though Daniel Moynihan had left the U.N., the U.S. would continue "calling a spade a spade."

Color Symbolism

The symbolism of white as positive and black as negative is pervasive in our culture, with the black / white words used in the beginning of this essay only one of many aspects. "Good guys" wear white hats and ride white horses, "bad guys" wear black hats and ride black horses. Angels are white, and devils are black. The definition of *black* includes "without any moral light or goodness, evil, wicked, indicating disgrace, sinful," while that of *white* includes "morally pure, spotless, innocent, free from evil intent."

A children's TV cartoon program, *Captain Scarlet*, is about an organization called Spectrum, whose purpose is to save the world from an evil extra-terrestrial force called the Mysterons. Everyone in Spectrum has a color name—Captain Scarlet, Captain Blue, etc. The one Spectrum agent who has been mysteriously taken over by the Mysterons and works to advance their evil aims is Captain Black. The person who heads Spectrum, the good organization out to defend the world, is Colonel White.

Three of the dictionary definitions of white are "fairness of complexion, purity, innocence." These definitions affect the standards of beauty in our culture, in which whiteness represents the norm. "Blondes have more fun" and "Wouldn't you really rather be a blonde" are sexist in their attitudes toward women generally, but are racist white standards when applied to third world women. A 1971 *Mademoiselle* advertisement pictured a curly-headed, ivory-skinned woman over the caption, "When you go blonde go all the way," and asked: "Isn't this how, in the back of your mind, you always wanted to look? All wide-eyed and silky blonde down to there, and innocent?" Whatever the advertising people meant by this particular woman's innocence, one must remember that "innocent" is one of the definitions of the word white. This standard of beauty when preached to all women is racist. The statement "Isn't this how, in the back of your mind, you always wanted to look?" either ignores third world women or assumes they long to be white.

Time magazine in its coverage of the Wimbledon tennis competition between the black Australian Evonne Goolagong and the white American Chris Evert described Ms. Goolagong as "the dusky daughter of an Australian sheep-shearer," while Ms. Evert was "a fair young girl from the middle-class groves of Florida." *Dusky* is a synonym ogf "black" and is defined as "having dark skin; of a dark color; gloomy; dark; swarthy." Its antonyms are "fair" and "blonde." *Fair* is defined in part as "free from blemish, imperfection, or anything that impairs the appearance, quality, or character; pleasing in appearance, attractive; clean; pretty; comely." By defining Evonne Goolagong as "dusky," *Time* technically defined her as the opposite of "pleasing in appearance; attractive; clean; pretty; comely."

The studies of Kenneth B. Clark, Mary Ellen Goodman, Judith Porter and others indicate that this pervasive "rightness of whiteness" in U.S. culture affects children before the age of four, providing white youngsters with a false sense of superiority and encouraging self-hatred among third world youngsters.

Ethnocentrism or From a White Perspective

Some words and phrases that are commonly used represent particular perspectives and frames of reference, and these often distort the understanding of the reader or listener. David R. Burgest[3] has written about the effect of using the terms "slave" or "master." He argues that the psychological impact of the statement referring to "the master raped his slave" is different from the impact of the same statement substituting the words: "the white captor raped an African woman held in captivity."

> Implicit in the English usage of the "master-slave" concept is ownership of the "slave" by the "master," therefore, the "master" is merely abusing his property (slave). In reality, the captives (slave) were African individuals with human worth, right and dignity and the term "slave" denounces that human quality thereby making the mass rape of African women by white captors more acceptable in the minds of people and setting a mental frame of reference for legitimizing the atrocities perpetuated against African people.

The term slave connotes a less than human quality and turns the captive person into a thing. For example two, McGraw-Hill Far Eastern Publishers textbooks (1970) stated, "At first it was the slaves who worked the cane and they got only food for it. Now men work cane and get money." Next time you write about slavery or read about it, try transposing all "slaves" into "African people held in captivity," "Black people forced to work for no pay" or "African people stolen from their families and societies." While it is more cumbersome, such phrasing conveys a different meaning.

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Passive Tense

Another means by which language shapes our perspective has been noted by Thomas Greenfield,[4] who writes that the achievements of Black people—and Black people themselves—have been hidden in

> the linguistic ghetto of the passive voice, the subordinate clause, and the 'understood' subject. The seemingly innocuous distinction (between active/passive voice) holds enormous implications for writers and speakers. When it is effectively applied, the rhetorical impact of the passive voice—the art of making the creator or instigator of action totally disappear from a reader's perception—can be devastating.

For instance, some history texts will discuss how European immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life and expanded opportunities, but will note that "slaves *were brought* to America." Not only does this omit the destruction of African societies and families, but it ignores the role of northern merchants and southern slaveholders in the profitable trade in human beings. Other books will state that "the continental railroad *was built*," conveniently omitting information about the Chinese laborers who built it or the oppression they suffered.

Another example. While touring Monticello, Greenfield noted that the tour guide

> made all the black people at Monticello "disappear" through her use of the passive voice. While speaking of the architectural achievements of Jefferson in the active voice, she unfailingly shifted to passive when speaking of the work performed by Negro slaves and skilled servants.

Noting a type of door that after 166 years continued to operate without need for repair, Greenfield remarks that the design aspect of the door was much simpler than the actual skill and work involved in building and installing it. Yet his guide stated: "Mr. Jefferson designed these doors . . ." while "the doors **were installed** in 1809." The workers who installed those doors were African people whom Jefferson held in bondage. The guide's use of the passive tense enabled her to dismiss the reality of Jefferson's slaveholding. It also meant that she did not have to make any mention of the skills of those people held in bondage.

Politics and Terminology

"Culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged" and "underdeveloped" are other terms which mislead and distort our awareness of reality. The application of the term "culturally deprived" to third world children in this society reflects a value judgment. It assumes that the dominant whites are cultured and all others without culture. In fact, third world chidren generally are bicultural, and many are bilingual, having grown up in their own culture as well as absorbing the dominant culture. In many ways, they are equipped with skills and experiences which white youth have been deprived of, since most white youth develop in a monocultural, monolingual environment. Burgest[5] suggests that the term "culturally deprived" be replaced by "culturally dispossessed," and that the

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The term tribe invokes even more negative implications when used in reference to African peoples. As Evelyn Jones Rich[8] has noted, the term is "almost always used to refer to Third World People and it implies a stage of development which is, in short, a put-down."

"Loaded" Words and Africans

Conflicts among diverse peoples within African nations are often referred to as "tribal warfare," while conflicts among the diverse peoples within European countries are never described in such terms. If the rivalries between the Ibo and the Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria are described as "tribal," why not the rivalries between Serbs and Slavs in Yugoslavia, or Scots and English in Great Britain, Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, or the Basques and the Southern Spaniards in Spain? Conflicts among African peoples in a particular nation have religious, cultural, economic and/or political roots. If we can analyze the roots of conflicts among European peoples in terms other than "tribal warfare," certainly we can do the same with African peoples, including correct reference to the ethnic groups or nations involved. For example, the terms "Kaffirs," "Hottentot" or "Bushmen" are names imposed by white Europeans. The correct names are always those by which a people refer to themselves. (In these instances Xhosa, Khoi-Khoin and San are correct.[9])

The generalized application of "tribal" in reference to Africans—as well as the failure to acknowledge the religious, cultural and social diversity of African peoples—is a decidedly racist dynamic. It is part of the process whereby Euro-Americans justify, or avoid confronting their oppression of third world peoples. Africa has been particularly insulted by this dynamic, as witness the pervasive "darkest Africa" image. This image, widespread in Western culture, evokes an Africa covered by jungles and inhabited by "uncivilized," "cannibalistic," "pagan," "savage" peoples. This "darkest Africa" image avoids the geographical reality. Less than 20 per cent of the African continent is wooded savanna, for example. The image also ignores the history of African cultures and civilizations. Ample evidence suggests this distortion of reality was developed as a convenient rationale for the European and American slave trade. The Western powers, rather than exploiting, were civilizing and christianizing "uncivilized" and "pagan savages" (so the rationalization went). This dynamic also served to justify Western colonialism. From Tarzan movies to racist children's books like *Doctor Dolittle* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the image of "savage" Africa and the myth of "the white man's burden" has been perpetuated in Western culture.

A 1972 *Time* magazine editorial lamenting the demise of *Life* magazine, stated that the "lavishness" of *Life*'s enterprises included "organizing safaris into darkest Africa." The same year, the *New York Times*' C.L. Sulzberger wrote that Africa has "a history as dark as the skins of many of its people." Terms such as "darkest Africa," "primitive," "tribe" ("tribal") or "jungle," in reference to Africa, perpetuate myths and are especially inexcusable in such large circulation publications.

term "economically disadvantaged" be replaced by "economically exploited." Both these terms present a perspective and implication that provide an entirely different frame of reference as to the reality of the third world experience in U.S. society.

Similarly, many nations of the third world are described as "underdeveloped." These less wealthy nations are generally those that suffered under colonialism and neo-colonialism. The "developed" nations are those that exploited their resources and wealth. Therefore, rather than referring to these countries as "underdeveloped," a more appropriate and meaningful designation might be "over exploited." Again, transpose this term next time you read about "underdeveloped nations" and note the different meaning that results.

Terms such as "culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged" and "underdeveloped" place the responsibility for their own conditions on those being so described. This is known as "Blaming the Victim."[6] It places responsibility for poverty on the victims of poverty. It removes the blame from those in power who benefit from, and continue to permit, poverty.

Still another example involves the use of "non-white," "minority" or "third world." While people of color are a minority in the U.S., they are part of the vast majority of the world's population, in which white people are a distinct minority. Thus, by utilizing the term minority to describe people of color in the U.S., we can lose sight of the global majority / minority reality—a fact of some importance in the increasing and interconnected struggles of people of color inside and outside the U.S.

To describe people of color as "non-white" is to use whiteness as the standard and norm against which to measure all others. Use of the term third world to describe all people of color overcomes the inherent bias of "minority" and "non-white." Moreover, it connects the struggles of third world people in the U.S. with the freedom struggles around the globe.

The term third world gained increasing usage after the 1955 Bandung Conference of "non-aligned" nations, which represented a third force outside of the two world superpowers. The "first world" represents the United States, Western Europe and their sphere of influence. The "second world" represents the Soviet Union and its sphere. The "third world" represents, for the most part, nations that were, or are, controlled by the "first world" or West. For the most part, these are nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

"Loaded" Words and Native Americans

Many words lead to a demeaning characterization of groups of people. For instance, Columbus, it is said, "discovered" America. The word *discover* is

defined as "to gain sight or knowledge of something previously unseen or unknown; to discover may be to find some existent thing that was previously unknown." Thus, a continent inhabited by millions of human beings cannot be "discovered." For history books to continue this usage represents a Eurocentric (white European) perspective on world history and ignores the existence of, and the perspective of, Native Americans. "Discovery," as used in the Euro-American context, implies the right to take what one finds, ignoring the rights of those who already inhabit or own the "discovered" thing.

Eurocentrism is also apparent in the usage of "victory" and "massacre" to describe the battles between Native Americans and whites. *Victory* is defined in the dictionary as "a success or triumph over an enemy in battle or war; the decisive defeat of an opponent." *Conquest* denotes the "taking over of control by the victor, and the obedience of the conquered." *Massacre* is defined as "the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing of a number of human beings, as in barbarous warfare or persecution, or for revenge or plunder." *Defend* is described as "to ward off attack from; guard against assault or injury; to strive to keep safe by resisting attack."

Eurocentrism turns these definitions around to serve the purpose of distorting history and justifying Euro-American conquest of the Native American homelands. Euro-Americans are not described in history books as invading Native American lands, but rather as defending *their* homes against "Indian" attacks. Since European communities were constantly encroaching on land already occupied, then a more honest interpretation would state that it was the Native Americans who were "warding off," "guarding" and "defending" their homelands.

Native American victories are invariably defined as "massacres," while the indiscriminate killing, extermination and plunder of Native American nations by Euro-Americans is defined as "victory." Distortion of history by the choice of "loaded" words used to describe historical events is a common racist practice. Native Americans are further characterized by the further mis-use of language. Rather than portraying Native Americans as human beings in highly defined and complex societies, cultures and civilizations, history books use such adjectives as "savages," "beasts," "primitive," and "backward."

Another term that has questionable connotations is *tribe*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines this noun as "a race of people; now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief." Morton Fried,[7] discussing "The Myth of Tribe," states that the word "did not become a general term of reference to American Indian society until the nineteenth century. Previously, the words commonly used for Indian populations were 'nation' and 'people.'" Since "tribe" has assumed a connotation of primitiveness or backwardness, it is suggested that the use of "nation" or "people" replace the term whenever possible in referring to Native American peoples.

Ethnocentrism is similarly reflected in the term "pagan" to describe traditional religions. A February 1973 *Time* magazine article on Uganda stated, "Moslems account for only 500,000 of Uganda's 10 million people. Of the remainder, 5,000,000 are Christians and the rest pagan." *Pagan* is defined as "Heathen, a follower of a polytheistic religion; one that has little or no religion and that is marked by a frank delight in and uninhibited seeking after sensual pleasures and material goods." *Heathen* is defined as "Unenlightened; an unconverted member of a people or nation that does not acknowledge the God of the Bible. A person whose culture or enlightenment is of an inferior grade, especially an irreligious person." Now, the people of Uganda, like almost all Africans, have serious religious beliefs and practices. As used by Westerners, "pagan" connotes something wild, primitive and inferior—another term to watch out for.

The variety of traditional structures that African people live in are their "houses," not "huts." A *hut* is "an often small and temporary dwelling of simple construction." And to describe Africans as "natives" (noun) is derogatory terminology—as in, "the natives are restless." The dictionary definition of *native* includes: "one of a people inhabiting a territorial area at the time of its discovery or becoming familiar to a foreigner; one belonging to a people having a less complex civilization." Therefore, use of "native," like use of "pagan" often implies a value judgment of white superiority.

Qualifying Adjectives

Words that would normally have positive connotations can have entirely different meanings when used in a racial context. For example, C. L. Sulzberger, the columnist of the *New York Times*, wrote in January 1975, about conversations he had with two people in Namibia. One was the white South African administrator of the country and the other, a member of SWAPO, the Namibian liberation movement. The first is described as "Dirk Mudge, who as senior elected member of the administration is a kind of acting Prime Minister. . . ." But the second person is introduced as Daniel Tijongarero, an intelligent Herero tribesman who is a member of SWAPO. . . ." What need was there for Sulzberger to state that Daniel Tijongarero is "intelligent"? Why not also state that Dick Mudge was "intelligent"—or do assume he wasn't?

A similar example form a 1968 *New York Times* article reporting on an address by Lyndon Johnson stated, "The President spoke to the well-dressed Negro officials and their wives." In what similar circumstances can one imagine a reporter finding it necessary to note that an audience of white government officials was "well-dressed"?

Still another word often used in a racist context is "qualified." In the 1960's white Americans often questioned whether Black people were "qualified" to hold public office, a question that was never raised (until too late) about white officials like Wallace, Maddox, Nixon, Agnew, Mitchell, et al. The question of

qualifications has been raised even more frequently in recent years as white people question whether Black people are "qualified" to be hired for positions in industry and educational institutions. "We're looking for a qualified Black" has been heard again and again as institutions are confronted with affirmative action goals.

A few final observations. The sports pages of newspapers and magazines call third world athletes by their first names much more frequently than white athletes. And many newspaper editorials are written in a "we"—"they" form. For example: "We try to give our Negro citizens the things they ask for," said Mayor Lee. Think about the assumptions implicit in the words "we," "our" and "they."

Wrap-Up

A *Saturday Review* editorial[10] on "The Environment of Language" stated that language

> . . . has as much to do with the philosophical and political conditioning of a society as geography or climate. . . . people in Western cultures do not realize the extent to which their racial attitudes have been conditioned since early childhood by the power of words to ennoble or condemn, augment or detract, glorify or demean. Negative language infects the subconscious of most Western people from the time they first learn to speak. Prejudice is not merely imparted or superimposed. It is metabolized in the bloodstream of society. What is needed is not so much a change in language as an awareness of the power of words to condition attitudes. If we can at least recognize the underpinnings of prejudice, we may be in a position to deal with the effects.

To recognize the racism in language is an important first step. Consciousness of the influence of language on our perceptions can help to negate much of that influence. But it is not enough to simply become aware of the affects of racism in conditioning attitudes. While we may not be able to change the language, we can definitely change our usage of the language. We can avoid using words that degrade people. We can make a conscious effort to use terminology that reflects a progressive perspective, as opposed to a distorting perspective. It is important for educators to provide students with opportunities to explore racism in language and to increase their awareness of it, as well as learning terminology that is positive and does not perpetuate negative human values.

Footnotes

1. Simon Podair, "How Bigotry Builds Through Language," *Negro Digest*, March '67

2. Jose Armas, "Antonio and the Mayor; A Cultural Review of the Film," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, Fall, '75

3. David R. Burgest, "The Racist Use of the English Language," *Black Scholar*, Sept. '73

4. Thomas Greenfield, "Race and Passive Voice at Monticello," *Crisis*, April '75

5. David R. Burgest, "Racism in Everyday Speech and Social Work Jargon," *Social Work*, July '73

6. William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, Pantheon Books, '71

7. Morton Fried, "The Myth of Tribe," *Natural History*, April '75

8. Evelyn Jones Rich, "Mind Your Language," *Africa Report*, Sept. / Oct. '74

9. Steve Wolf, "Catalogers in Revolt Against LC's Racist, Sexist Headings," *Bulle in of Interracial Books for Children*, Vol. 6, Nos. 3&4, '75

10. "The Environment of Language," *Saturday Review*, April 8, '67

Also see:

Roger Bastide, "Color, Racism and Christianity," *Daedalus*, Spring '67

Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Significance of Skin Color in Human Relations," *Daedalus*, Spring '67

Lloyd Yabura, "Towards a Language of Humanism," *Rhythm*, Summer '71

UNESCO, "Recommendations Concerning Terminology in Education on Race Questions," June '68

For use in: Elementary, secondary, college classes or in teacher training.

By Robert B. Moore, Ed.D.

Objectives: (1) To recognize racism in the English language.

(2) To learn to use less racist language.

Rationale: All languages both reflect and extend the culture from which they developed. Since neither culture nor language is static, we can help eliminate racism in our culture by recognizing and eliminating it from our language.

Method: Reading, discussion and classroom exercises.

Materials: Enclosed essay and classroom activities. Dictionary. Blackboard and chalk or large newsprint pad and markers. For grades Kindergarten through 3, a copy of Ann McGovern's "Black Is Beautiful," (Four Winds Press, 1969) is recommended.

Activities: Teacher / trainer / facilitator should read all of the materials in this kit before beginning any activity.

For pre-school through third grade, we are not suggesting any structured group activity. Instead, we are urging that the teacher consciously—but naturally and informally—reinforce positive associations with the word "black" at every opportunity. For example: "What beautiful black hair he has." "What a lovely dark night it was last night." "The Black teacher was so dark and attractive." Ann McGovern's "Black is Beautiful," Four Winds Press, 1969, is an excellent small book of evocative short poems and photographs.

Activity I. WHAT COLOR IS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE?

1. Write the terms "black" and "white" at the top of the blackboard.

2. Ask students to call out as many words or phrases as they can think of which include these words. Write the terms below the appropriate heading, e.g., whitewash, blacklist, etc. Students can use the dictionary to add to the lists. Discuss the meaning of each term and mark each with either a plus (+) for positive meaning or a minus (–) for negative meaning. Mark questionable terms with a question mark. Add up positives and negatives for each column.

3. Ask students to discuss:

(A) The reasons for the great disparity between black and white positives.

(Note: Terms like "white lie" and "white wash," which have negative connotations, are somewhat neutralized by being either harmless or meant to make something better. Other "white" terms with negative connotations—"white flag," "white feather," "white livered"—do not reflect evil but rather weakness or cowardice. Also, note that the term "in the black" to describe financial health and soundness is not contrasted with "in the white" but with "in the red"—descriptive terms of the color of ink used in bookkeeping.)

(B) How this disparity unconsciously affects a white child's and a Black child's self-image.

4. Tell class about a lesson for teachers and students on racism in language, developed by Black actor, Ossie Lavis, who looked up "whiteness" and "blackness" in Roget's *Thesaurus* and found:

> WHITENESS has 134 synonyms. 44 are favorable, such as purity, cleanliness, innocent, fair, trustworthy. Only 10 synonyms are negative, such as whitewash.
>
> BLACKNESS has 120 synonyms. 60 are unfavorable. Some are: blotch, smut, murky, evil, deadly, dirty, wicked. There are 20 synonyms directly related to race, such as Negress, nigger, darky, blackamoor.

"The English language is my enemy. It teaches the Black child 60 ways to hate himself and the white child 60 ways to aid and abet him in the crime."—Ossie Davis.

Activity II. PRACTICING NON-RACIST LANGUAGE

1. Urge students to avoid language that uses the word "black" in a negative manner and "white" in a positive manner. Have them rephrase the following sentences eliminating the negative use of "black":

(A) He was the black sheep of the family.

(B) The assassination of Martin Luther King was a black day in our country's history.

(C) She will suffer for her black deeds.

(D) They were blackballed from the group because of their blackhearted attitudes.

(E) She gave him a black look.

(F) Why do you always look at the dark side of things?

(G) He was a master of the black art of warfare.

(H) They tried to blackmail me into doing that.

(I) That will be a black mark on his record for a long time to come.

(J) Many actors were put on a blacklist in the 1950's.

Activity III. SYMBOLISM IN LANGUAGE

Yuri Yevtushenko, the Russian poet, on hearing of the assassination of Martin Luther King, wrote:

> His skin was black
> but with the purest soul,
> white as the snow . . .

1. Write this poem on the board and tell students of its background. Discuss the color symbolism Yevtushenko utilized and the negative implications for Black people. (The word "but" implies "even though"—even though his skin was black, at least his soul was white, i.e., pure.)

Read the following poem to students, a poem written in response to Yevtushenko. Discuss the implication of color symbolism in this poem and the different associations of "black" in each poem.

> Such a white soul, they say,
> that noble pastor had.
> His skin so black, they say,
> his skin so black in color,
> was on the inside snow,
> a white lily,
> fresh milk,
> cotton.
> Such innocence.
> There wasn't one stain
> on his impeccable interior.
>
> (In short, a handsome find:
> "The Black whose soul was white,"
> that curiosity).
>
> Still it might be said another way:
> What a powerful black soul
> that gentlest of pastors had.
> What proud black passion
> burned in his open heart.
> What pure black thoughts
> were nourished in his fertile brain.
> What black love,
> so colorlessly
> given.
>
> And why not,
> why couldn't that heroic pastor
> have a soul that's black?
>
> A soul as black as coal.

Reprinted from "Man-making Words: Selected Poems of Nicolas Guillen," 1972, Robert Marquez & David Arthur McMurray.

Activity IV. LOADED WORDS AND / OR STEREOTYPING WORDS

Many words are loaded, having insulting or negative overtones, particularly when used in reference to Third World people. The terms listed below are often used when discussing one or more Thrid World groups. These terms characterize and stereotype people. Rarely are they used to describe white people or their actions.

1. Define "stereotype." (A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race or sex, which usually carries derogatory implications.)

2. Discuss the use of such terms with the students and provide the following examples:

> "... the enemy was the crafty Mexican Border Bandit, the vengeful vaquero of Old Mexico."
>
> *The Texas Rangers*, by Will Hanry
> New York, Random House, 1957

> "It was said that wild beasts and savage Indians lurked in the woods that crept close to the rugged shore."
>
> *Turkeys, Pilgrims, and Indian Corn: The Story of Thanksgiving Symbols* by Edna Barth
> New York, Seabury Press, 1975

> "Americans believed that if war came, these tribesmen, bribed by the English, would ravage the frontier regions and massacre the women and children."
>
> *The Free and the Brave* by Henry C. Graff,
> Rand McNally, 1967

3. Ask students to think to other words that are often associated with particular groups in a negative and sterreotypical manner, listing the words on the board. Add words from the list below if students do not mention them.

4. Discuss why the terms are "put-downs" and stereotypes and how they reflect ethnocentric viewpoints.

(You may want to put the list of terms on newsprint and leave it on a wall for easy reference, with blank newsprint beside it. Ask students to keep a record of every instance they find of one of these terms being used in relation to a Third World person or group. TV programs are an unfailing source of loaded words.)

backward
barbarian
blood-thirsty
conniving
crafty
cruel
docile
ferocious
fierce
foolish
greasy
heathen
hostile
inscrutable
insolent
lazy
lurking
marauding
massacre
mean
menacing
merciless
pagan
peaceful
pitiless
plunder
primitive
problem
prowling
raiding
renegade
ruthless
savage
scheming
shrieking
slaughter
sneaky
sullen
superstitious
suspicious
terrifying
threatening
treacherous
troublesome
uncivilized
unfriendly
untrustworthy
vicious
violent
warlike
wild

Activity V. DETECTING RACIST LANGUAGE

(for older students and adults)

1. Present some of the points in the essay section to the group for discussion:

   (A) An "intelligent" or "qualified" Black man.

   (B) "Disadvantaged," etc.

   (C) We and they—slaves and people.

2. Assign students to bring in examples—over a week's period of time—of racist language from newspapers, magazines, books, advertisements, comic books, etc.

3. Discuss examples.

For a free catalog listing many student and teacher materials, write to:

The Reading/Spectrum Resources Center, Rm. 300, 1521 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023